



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

ROGER BERLINER
COUNCILMEMBER
DISTRICT 1

CHAIRMAN
TRANSPORTATION, INFRASTRUCTURE
ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

MEMORANDUM

February 16, 2015

TO: Nancy Floreen, Chair, Planning, Housing, Economic Development Committee
George Leventhal, Member, Planning, Housing, Economic Development Committee
Hans Riemer, Member, Planning, Housing, Economic Development Committee

FROM: Roger Berliner

SUBJECT: Westbard Sector Plan

I believe the goals of the Westbard Plan are laudable: revitalization of the Westbard Shopping Center; increasing affordable housing in this part of the county; creating green, public gathering spaces; and greatly enhancing environmental and stormwater protections are all important objectives.

And I am convinced achieving these objectives does not have to come at the expense of the surrounding neighborhoods nor at the cost of overburdening our already stretched infrastructure. The plan put forth by our planning board is too aggressive. It can and should be substantially pared back by almost half. In doing so, the Council will allow the Westbard community to experience a more organic and gradual transformation. To that end, I am writing to you today to share some of my thoughts on how I believe we could achieve these objectives and to respectfully ask for your Committee's consideration during the upcoming worksessions.

1. **Significantly reduce the overall number of net new units to approximately 1,200 units** - about half of what was proposed in the Planning Board Draft. To achieve this, I recommend the following:
 - a. **Do not upzone properties in the River Road Corridor**, but implement a floating zone for those properties that wish to seek redevelopment in the future and are integral to public policy goals of the plan such as the restoration of the Willett Branch.. The process involved in pursuing development under a floating zone provides ample opportunities for public input and that of the Planning Department, Planning Board, and Council to assess the pace and impact of earlier development.

- b. **Eliminate the floating zone for the Little Falls Library parcel.** The Executive Branch has stated that there are no plans to redevelop the Little Falls Library site in the foreseeable future. If and when the building needs to be razed or needs major structural renovations, the issue of redeveloping with affordable housing can be revisited.
 - c. **Eliminate the CRT floating zone for the IM-zoned properties in the South River District.** The properties provide essential services to the Westbard and surrounding communities and the light industrial zoning should be retained.
- 2. **Protect the integrity of existing residential areas by implementing appropriate zoning and height adjustments for properties adjacent to new development.**
 - a. **Limit redevelopment on the Manor Care site to townhomes**
 - b. **Retain the 35' height limit on the Park Bethesda parcel closest to the Westwood Mews Condominiums** and include language in the plan that calls for sensitivity to the adjacent residential community when siting the new townhomes on this property.
 - c. **Reduce the height on the Westwood II parcel** in order to provide a better transition to the single family neighborhood of Springfield.
- 3. **Include strong language reflecting the current development plan for Washington Episcopal School.** Reduce the FAR on this property, especially the commercial allowance, as it does not reflect the negotiated plan under the previous PD-28 zoning. Limit any new residential units to the senior residential project already planned and negotiated for the parcel and ensure that any new development plan incorporate the previously approved binding elements for this property.
- 4. **Use the civic space to be provided by Equity One as a senior center.** 24% of Westbard residents are 65 years of age or older, double the countywide average. It is my understanding that Equity One has agreed to provide the County public use space in its new center. I recommend we consider using that space for a senior center since the closest senior center to Westbard is in Silver Spring. There is not a single county senior center west of 270.
- 5. **Affordable Housing:** I support the affordable housing goals of the plan as well as the desire for a better mix of residential options in the Westbard area. There are currently only 43 affordable income restricted units in the area and we need to do better. Even if the overall scale of the plan is reduced, an estimated 190-250 net new affordable/workforce units could be realized in addition to the 185 units of senior housing already approved for the Washington Episcopal School site.
- 6. **Transportation & Transit:** Given Westbard's proximity to major metro and some of our urban nodes, we should increase transit options as well as provide for improved multimodal connections and pedestrian safety:
 - a. **Expansion of current Ride-On Route 23 and WMATA's T-2 Route** should be strongly encouraged if ridership projections support such expansion. Enhanced bus shelters, real time arrival information, and direct service to Bethesda should be added.
 - b. **Private shuttles to and from Metro** should be required of new development and required at site plan.

- c. **The realignment of Westbard and River Road** should be a required element of the plan in order to better protect the Springfield community from cut through traffic and truck traffic in particular.
 - d. The proposed **connector road between Westbard Avenue and River Road and enhanced access to the Capital Crescent Trail** on the Park Bethesda property should be a required element of the plan.
 - e. **Expanded and improved pedestrian and bicycle facilities** should be a strong requirement of the plan. In addition to the complete streets framework outlined in the plan, **pedestrian safety improvements to River Road** should be implemented regardless of redevelopment in the corridor. Each pedestrian crossing should be evaluated for repainting, the addition of reflective lighting, and additional signage and requests made to State Highway Administration. Implementation of traffic calming measure on River Road should be evaluated.
 - f. Include strong language urging the implementation of a **traffic light at River Road and Landy Lane** by the State Highway Administration.
7. **Schools:** Reducing the scope of the plan by approximately half will significantly reduce, but not eliminate, concerns regarding the impact of the plan on our already overcrowded schools.
- a. **While the expanded school analysis in the Appendix (pp. 111-114) is commendable, more of this information should be included in the primary Sector Plan document.** The 1/8 of a page devoted to schools on page 12 of the Draft Plan is inadequate. In addition, additional details relating to the viability of school sites for additional capacity and lease information for current closed schools referenced should be included.
 - b. Although MCPS has significantly refined its generation rate formulas and techniques in recent years, debate centered around this topic continues. I have written to MCPS and asked if they would **consider a shift to cluster specific student generation formulas** vs. the more regional formulas used today. The Whitman Cluster PTA Leadership, using MCPS GIS data, has demonstrated a large discrepancy between historical projections for the Cluster using the regional formula and the actual numbers of students emerging from multifamily buildings within the cluster. This discrepancy needs to be understood, accounted for, and documented in the plan as appropriate.
 - c. The Whitman Cluster PTA leadership, MCPS staff, and I will be meeting soon to review student generation numbers as they relate to current infrastructure capacity and future/planned capacity projects. I will keep you abreast of those discussions.
8. Refine the zoning recommendations and consider reducing the FAR for parcel 1, the Westwood Shopping Center, in alignment with the plan's redevelopment goals for the property. Doing so would provide greater certainty for the community that the new project will be built out at a neighborhood scale.
9. **The restoration of the Willett Branch and accompanying greenway/parkland must remain an integral part of this plan.** Whenever possible, the restoration work should be required of property owners at time of redevelopment. A Capital Improvement Project (CIP) description form should be developed for that portion that must be completed by the Department of Parks

10. **Public amenities in this plan must not be compromised.** Language in the plan must make it clear that the various new green/public gathering spaces recommended in the Draft Plan must be dedicated at the time of site plan approval. The **Civic Green** in the Westbard District should be no less than ½ acre. If the Planning Department does not believe, for some reason, that public amenities outlined in the plan can be required of property owners at site plan, an amenity fund should be considered to account for the public amenities.
11. **Preserving and Enhancing Local Retail:** Strengthen and add language clarifying the desire to minimize disruption to existing local retail establishments and to retain existing local retailers to the extent possible. New retail options should be neighborhood- serving rather than regional or destination retail entities. It is highly encouraging that Equity One has stated in writing their commitment to relocate local retailers into their new space to the extent possible at existing rental rates (plus CPI). If temporary relocations must occur, all county resources, including the services of the County's *Small Business Navigator*, should be employed.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of these suggestions. I look forward to joining you and working with you to achieve the optimal results for our residents and county as we finalize the Westbard Sector Plan.

cc: Councilmembers
Marlene Michaelson
Glenn Orlin